



U.S. Department of Justice

United States Attorney

Eastern District of Pennsylvania

Richard Manieri
Direct Dial: (215) 861-8525
Facsimile: (215) 861- 8509
E-mail Address: richard.manieri@usdoj.gov

615 Chestnut Street
Suite 1250
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106-4476
(215) 861-8200

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U.S. ATTORNEY URGES CONSUMERS TO GUARD AGAINST IDENTITY THEFT

Holiday Shopping Season Often Means Christmas For Identity Thieves

PHILADELPHIA - Credit card receipts. Social Security numbers. Unopened mail. All are potential gifts for an identity thief who would like nothing more than to steal Christmas.

"This is the fastest growing crime in the United States," said Patrick Meehan, whose office in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania initiated and operates a Regional Identity Theft Investigation Group designed to enhance information sharing among federal, state and local agencies. "People often don't know that their identity has been compromised until they find out the hard way. They begin to get calls for payment of bills they've never incurred. They're denied credit. Or, a credit card purchase doesn't go through."

According to the Federal Trade Commission, 27.3 million Americans have been victims of identity theft in the past five years, including 9.9 million people in the last year alone. The FTC also reports that last year's identity theft losses to businesses and financial institutions totaled almost \$48 billion and consumer victims reported \$5 billion in out-of-pocket expenses.

As with any other crime, there is no such thing as complete protection. However, you can minimize your risk of becoming a victim of identity theft. The Federal Trade Commission offers the following advice:

- **Don't give out your personal information over the phone, through the mail or via the Internet unless you've initiated the contact or are sure you know who you're dealing with. Identity thieves often post as bank representatives and even government agencies in an effort to get you to reveal your Social Security Number.**
- **Don't carry your SSN card.**
- **Secure personal information in your home, especially if you have roommates or employ outside help.**
- **Guard your mail and trash. Identity thieves are not above picking through the trash to get a nugget of personal information.**
- **Shred or tear your charge receipts, credit applications, insurance forms, physician statements, checks and bank statements, expired charge cards, and credit offers you get in the mail.**

For more information on how to prevent identity theft or to file a complaint, you can visit the Federal Trade Commission's identity theft Web site at www.consumer.gov/idtheft.